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## LISTENING TO VOICES FROM BELOW: LEARNING FROM OLDER WOMEN'S SELF-ORGANISED GROUPS TO DECOLONISE SOCIAL WORK IN UGANDA

TUSASIIRWE, Sharlotte

### ABSTRACT

*Although professional social work in Uganda has a long history, given its colonial origin in the 1950s, the profession is still struggling with challenges such as an unclear professional mandate, public recognition and relevance. These challenges point to the ultimate need for decolonisation although social workers are grappling with finding ways to decolonise and localise their practice. This paper presents local knowledge on the self-organised mutual support groups led by older women, based on life story interviews of 10 older women in a rural community in South Western Uganda. Local knowledge on groups' formation and functions, their strengths and constraints will be presented. The main argument is that this local knowledge and experience can provide a basis for culturally appropriate social work interventions that build on the already existing initiatives and wisdom of people from below. The paper begins with a discussion on the current situation of social work in Uganda before presenting the empirical findings on older women's self-organised groups and how they can inform decolonisation of social work practice in Uganda.*

**KEY TERMS:** decolonisation, social work, culturally relevant, older women, Uganda, community-based

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## INTRODUCTION

Whilst social work in Uganda has a long history, the profession is still struggling with challenges of relevance and recognition (Twikirize, 2014). Modelled after the British system, professional social work was imported to Uganda in the 1950s as a modern, universal and superior model of responding to local social problems thus displacing traditional models of helping like those led by traditional chiefs in the communities (Ministry of planning and Community Development, 1965). These local models were undervalued by the colonialists who regarded them as not organised enough to address problems of their envisaged modern Ugandan society.

The western professional social work model which espouses predominantly, individualistic tendencies, continues to dominate the post-colonial social work practice and education in Uganda despite its failures to adequately meet the socio-cultural realities of the local people (Spitzer, 2017). Taking an example of social protection in Uganda, most interventions made by social workers and policy makers have maintained their historical reliance and conformation to Eurocentric welfare state models (Midgley, 2013). Uganda is currently implementing a cash transfer programme called Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment (SAGE), where the first 100 oldest individuals in selected sub-counties are being given 25,000 UGX (\$7) monthly. While the scheme provides some relief to individual older people who are selected, who reportedly have used this money to access basic services like health care, the scheme is constrained by its non-universal nature, limited scope and coverage. Financial constraints by the Ugandan government threaten the sustainability of the scheme which remains heavily donor funded (Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development, 2016). Most of older people are excluded from the programme which is projected to cover only 40 districts out of 121 districts of Uganda by 2020. Therefore majority of older people are ageing with limited formal support yet the informal support especially from the extended family is also being constrained by widespread poverty (Bukuluki, Mukuye, Mubiru, & Namuddu, 2017). Confronted with such limitations of existing models, Ugandan social workers are faced with a challenge of exploring models of practice that are appropriate for addressing widespread vulnerability while putting into consideration contextual realities.

The search for appropriate social work has led to the evolution of different concepts to describe the process for example indigenisation, localisation, culturally relevant social work, decolonisation. The most preferred concept in Uganda is indigenisation which means “a process of trying to fit imported knowledge and models into the local context, implying maintenance of strong links with the original material” (Twikirize, 2014, p.79). The process of fitting or adapting western models into local contexts has been defined as a failed project given the persistence of not only social problems like poverty which the models are seeking to address but also persistent domination of western international frameworks in diverse cultural contexts (Ugiagbe, 2017). Osei-Hwedie (2017) has presented about the impossibility of indigenising social work education and practice although he maintains that social work is a context-based profession that draws on, responds to needs, based on values and norms of society. Moving forward, Osei-Hwedie proposes an evaluation of African cultural values, methods and knowledges to form the basis for social work in Africa. The need to go beyond indigenisation to decolonisation has been echoed by scholars Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird & Hetherington (2013). Decolonisation of social work requires social work to cease its participation in colonising projects and “to remove the often subtle vestiges of colonisation from theory and practice” (Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington, 2013) p.7). Like Osei-Hwedie’s argument on African knowledges, decolonisation requires recognition of the contribution of local knowledges, traditions and practices as well as adopting a bottom-up approach to practice.

A bottom-up approach that ensures reflective learning from the local communities has also been argued as a preferable way to engage in the process of searching for appropriate social work (Twikirize, 2014). Whilst it has been acknowledged that there is need to carefully, rigorously and respectfully seek and include local knowledge and ways of doing (Doucet & Denov, 2012), limited local research exists in Uganda that documents local knowledge that can provide the basis for decolonised social work (Twikirize, 2014). Social work education and practice continues to be marred by limited context-specific concepts, theories, methods and examples. In response to this need, this paper presents local knowledge on self-organised mutual groups by older women living in a rural community in Uganda. It argues that these local experiences and ways of thinking, knowing and doing should inform the development of strengths-based and culturally appropriate social work interventions and policies that build on already existing mechanisms of survival by older people themselves. The paper will provide the methodology followed by the findings, and lessons for decolonising social work practice and education will be discussed.

## SETTING, METHODS AND ETHICS

### Setting

This paper presents a portion of findings from the broader PhD project that was aimed at exploring the subjective experiences of older women ageing in Uganda. Nyakabungo B Village, a rural community in South Western Uganda was purposively selected. Bwambara Sub-county, located in Rukungiri District, is regarded as a hard-to-

reach rural area given its geographical location which affects its accessibility. It is situated in Queen Elizabeth National Park and approximately 404 km away from Kampala city. This setting was purposively selected for this study to allow voices from such a hard-to-reach rural area to be explored and heard. Nyakabungo is an ethnically-mixed community of Banyankole, Bakiiga and Banyabutumbi. Typical of many rural communities in Uganda, their main sources of livelihood is subsistence agriculture and fishing. The area has very limited access to formal services like basic health care, education. Kikarara parish is one of the worst income poverty-stricken areas in Rukungiri District (Rukungiri District Local Government, 2009).

### Methods

Findings for this paper are based on data collected through life story interviews and Focus Group Discussions conducted with 10 older women aged 50+. Although the official definition of older people in Uganda is 60+ years, age 50+ was adopted to cater for the context-based rural and social definitions of old age which may be overlooked by assumed universal chronological-based explanations of old age. Life-story interviews were conducted in Runyankole/Rukiiga, a local language predominantly used in the community and also well-known by the researcher. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into English. Individual life story interviews were conducted with each of the 10 older women. Then the researcher did a preliminary analysis of the individual interviews and came up with emerging themes from the interviews. These themes were then reported back to the 10 older women in a focus group setting. Two Focus Group Discussions were conducted to discuss the emerging themes from the lifestory interviews. The focus group discussions steered additional feedback and sharing of collective experiences by the older women.

### Ethics

Interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded after seeking and obtaining verbal informed consent from the participants. All the audio-recordings were transcribed in English and files stored on password protected computer. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants. Ethical approval was attained from Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics committee (H11927), Makerere University School of Social Sciences (03.17.028) and the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (SS4316). Approval was also obtained from local structures at Rukungiri District Local Government, Bwambara Sub County, and Nyakabungo B village Local Council. Computer software NVIVO 10 was used to manage and assist in analysing data for emerging themes and patterns. This paper discusses one key theme from the older women's stories: the self-organised community-based groups as an important means of survival for the older women. I discuss the strengths and constraints of these groups as well as the lessons that can be learnt for decolonising social work practice and education in Uganda.

## FINDINGS

Older women have spent their lifetime actively engaging in self-organised community-based groups through which they support each other to survive during hardships. Older women cited a number of groups instrumental to their survival for instance *Bataka kweziika* groups (burial aid group), *bamukaaka* groups (grandmothers' rotational farming and credit groups). The strengths of these support groups lies in their principles of working in solidarity, utilising locally available resources, and informal knowledge, wisdom and skills that the older women have accumulated overtime. It is these principles that have sustained the groups and held communities cohesive. These groups have been established and have survived without external support from professional workers or government or Non-governmental interventions. The groups have a long history. They survived the wrath of colonialism and continue to persist. The stories of older women and their survival through their support groups represents a life possible beyond interventions led predominantly by formal welfare institutions. Because of their persistence and communal grounding, they need to be acknowledged and built on by social workers and policy makers seeking decolonised social work practice that listens to the marginalised women and starts from where they are. The specific self-organised groups and their functions are discussed below.

### *Bataka kweziika* (Burial aid groups)

Death is one of the major risks that people in the rural communities grapple with given the uncertainty surrounding it and the limited coping capacity of some members because of low incomes and accumulated savings. As a result, local community members, including both men and women, have formed these burial aid groups mainly to provide mutual help to each other during times of death. They support each other by buying food, coffins when a member dies as Oliva explains.

*It [bataka kweziika group] helps in such a way that when you lose a person, they will help you with the burial arrangements, people come and burry, they buy food and prepare it, and the mourners eat (Oliva, 60).*

Burial groups support their members by providing the basics needed to provide a decent send-off to their member. Although originally established to provide burial aid, older women talked of the groups scaling up their activities to respond to the contemporary social problems emerging in their communities for instance food insecurity as a result of climate change. In their burial groups, they have established 'food banks' where each member brings grains and beans to the community store and this food is used only when there is a community food crisis like during drought periods when members are unable to bring food. Burial aid groups have also scaled up their activities to incorporate a savings and credit function where each members must save an agreed on amount (2000UGX) and this can be accessed as small loans to the member at a smaller interest. When it accumulates, it is invested into communal income generating project as explained below by Prisca

*Right now we [bataka] are constructing a building with four rooms and we would like to complete them and rent them out, and in one put in our things like saucepans, and other things (Prisca, 62).*

Such communal projects are envisioned to generate income to run different activities by the group. Despite meeting the practical needs of people in the communities, burial aid groups have provided spaces where mobilisation to form smaller groups to meet specific needs of members is done for instance *bamukaaka* groups.

### **Bamukaaka groups (rotational farming and credit groups)**

Given that subsistence agriculture is the major livelihood source for the rural older women, digging is a critical part of their lives. As such, the older women have mobilized each other and formed rotational farming groups where they support each other to prepare gardens in time. Women in these groups dig, weed, and harvest their crops together. They do this on a rotational basis. Women support each other with their physical labour, their accumulated informal knowledge, skills and wisdom in cultivation. These older women have been in such rotational farming groups from when they were young and they still find them even more helpful.

*Our group is for older women, those who can manage, we come together and dig for each other and there are also [farming groups for] young women like my daughter-in-law who was here a few minutes ago. I have greatly benefited from it [farming group], you see where those beans are, it is two and half acres, with my little energy would I weed that whole garden and finish it?, no, it would not be possible. But when I invited them [group members] in just two days we had finished the weeding (Prisca, 62).*

Older women support each other by providing labour throughout the whole farming process from preparing gardens to harvesting the crops. Through this concerted effort, they have managed to put food on their table in their old age and poor health. Some of the farming groups are multipurpose going beyond digging to include other activities like savings and credit function, although the older women were also part of support groups specifically set up to provide credit like the *Biika oguize* (savings and credit) groups. Adopting a savings function have enabled older women access small loans and hence beating the exclusion from financial institutions that view the old as non-credit worthy.

*We have a savings box, whatever you have whether 500 Ugandan shillings [UGX], 1,000 UGX, 5,000 UGX, you keep saving whatever you have and when you have an issue like sickness you can go there and they give you the money and it helps you (Hellen,74).*

These groups have helped women access small loans to pay for basic services for instance purchasing medicine, transport to health centres and school fees for their grandchildren's education.

### *Strengths of self-organised groups*

The strengths of these women's groups lie within the fact that they value their local culture of working together, utilising locally available resources and the agency, commitment and leadership of older women in the community.

### *Valuing local culture of working in solidarity*

The groups demonstrate the collectivism and working in solidarity that older women and other community members adopt in finding local solutions for the existing social problems. Solidarity is encapsulated also in the naming of the groups for instance '*Bataka Kwezika*' or burial aid groups reflects the formation of these groups by community members (called *Abataka*) to support each other to bury their own people (*kweziika*), without waiting for or relying on 'outsiders' like government to come and do it for them. Community members agreed to always contribute the resources they have available and accessible to help their member provide a decent send-off for their dear ones. Grandmothers' groups follow the principle of '*okukwatanisa*' meaning working together in unity. Groups believe that *ageetereine niigo gaata Iguufa* meaning that through concerted effort by all the teeth, it is possible to break a bone. Older women also talked about their belief that *kamwe kamwe nigwo muganda*, meaning that one by one makes a bundle which all explain why they prefer to come together in a group than

working individually. The encompassing principle in working together is that it reflects humanness or *obuntu* or *Ubuntu*.

#### *Valuing local resources*

These community-based groups are a demonstration of how the community themselves have mobilised their own locally available resources within their means to support themselves during dire times. These groups do not start from what the community members lack but rather they engage with the resources they have available in their localities. In other words, they adopt an asset and strengths-based rather than a deficit model. For example the burial aid groups depend on the produce that the group members themselves cultivate, collect and share with each other including food crops like beans, rice, and millet. Rotational farming groups tap into the older women's physical labour, skills and wisdom they have accumulated over their lifetime. This has been critical for the sustainability of these groups as they do not rely on any external support from Government or NGOs.

#### *Groups' utilisation of older women's agency, commitment and leadership*

These groups tap into older women's agency and commitment. These groups have provided avenues and spaces for women to take up leadership in their different capacities. Older women have mobilised, formed and they run those groups themselves especially the women-only groups like the rotational farming groups and credit groups. Even in the broader mixed burial aid groups, older women are playing active roles as members of the group, fully committed to sustaining and supporting other group members. This role may be overlooked by advocates of representative democracy who take a narrow view of leadership by looking at it in terms of only those persons occupying specific positions of authority for example those serving on group committees.

#### **Constraints of the groups**

The most pressing challenge that constrains older women's groups is the lack of sufficient capital to engage in income generating activities as a way of diversifying their livelihood to raise some money to meet their basics. Older women have formed the groups to support each other raise money for communal income generating projects like goat keeping, chicken rearing as Kengiga explains about their grandmothers group:

*We had also thought that if we bought like ten goats, depending on the money that we would have saved, and we distribute them to some members and if it gives birth then you give the young one to another member, and like that. That's what we had also agreed on. But because of the long dry season, we have not been able to save enough money, we save some little and then borrow all of it (Kengiga, 55).*

Grandmothers' plans to start an income generating project have not been realised as their sources of income which is subsistence agriculture has been affected by drought that has hit their place for two consecutive years. It is during such climate-related risks that older women have sought grants from external organisations particularly the government. However, due to the elite-dominated top-down nature of policy and programme making in Uganda, older women have been excluded from most of the formal interventions which apply age-based discrimination as seen in the current Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP) which targets women between 18-65 years. Older women like the ones who participated in this study are systematically excluded from the programme as shared below

*...We were told at the Bwambara sub-county headquarters that older women in the age of 60, 70 years, and above that we cannot manage such a group (Nyanjura, 70+).*

When it comes to formal support, systems and policies treat older women as old, weak, dependent and vulnerable and thus unable to engage in productive work. Yet this ageist thinking does not reflect the reality of the older women who participated in this study. These older women are working hard in their groups. They have the ideas of what income generating activities they want to engage in but are constrained by such systematic and societal discrimination that denies them the much needed support and services, and under looks their attempted inventions and ingenuity in persevering their adversities. Challenging such structural discrimination that is embedded in formal policies and programmes is where social workers are needed most. The overall experiences of older women have implications and lessons for decolonising social work practice in Uganda as discussed in the next section.

#### **LESSONS FOR DECOLONISING SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

Whilst this study was conducted in one community in Western Uganda, the findings regarding the local ways of helping reflect what transpires in most other rural communities in Uganda as demonstrated by other researchers documenting traditional mechanisms of helping in other regions of Uganda (Kasente, Asingwire, Banugire, & Kyomuhendo, 2002). Findings of this study demonstrate that self-organised community groups have been instrumental in the everyday survival of older women in Bwambara. The women support each other through



hardships and in the absence of formal forms of support from government or Non-government organisations. The strength of these groups is grounded in their value and utilisation of local knowledge, wisdom, resources, skills as well as the older women's agency and commitment. However, older women's self-organised mutual groups remain unexplored and unsupported to inform community led-formal social protection. Formal social protection established by social workers and policy makers mainly copy Eurocentric models hence borrow very little from these long existing models of helping adopted by rural people. For example, the current SAGE programme for older people has an individualistic focus which does not reflect the collectiveness and working in solidarity that the older women and other local community members were engaged in through their self-organised mutual groups. Under looking of community-based models of helping has not just started in Uganda but rather has its roots in the colonial history of professional social work where traditional mechanisms were regarded as non-modern and inferior to the British's professional formal social welfare as the ideal model of helping. In fact as Ruparanganda, Ruparanganda, & Mabvurira (2018) argue, social protection through traditional support systems like the self-organised groups dates before colonisation of Africa and is still prevalent in the modern society although current social protection frameworks and programs exclude them in their definitions of social protection for instance the International Labour Organisation definition of social security. Although Ruparanganda, Ruparanganda & Mabvurira (2018) note that traditional social security operates as "an adjunct" to the formal social security systems, the other way round is true especially given the limited coverage and scope of formal social security in Uganda.

Therefore, the first step to decolonise social work practice in Uganda is the need for professional social workers and policy makers to first of all acknowledge, explore, validate, value the often under looked local wisdom and existing community-based alternatives such as the self-organised groups led by older women. Decolonisation means putting first people in rural communities and their lived experiences to inform policy and programme design.

### **Local voice informing international and national policy agenda and programme design**

Professional social workers, policy makers in Uganda need to reflect and re-examine the position their elite and expertise power has placed them and the extent to which they draw on local knowledge from the majority non-elite in the rural areas like the older women. Social workers need to re-examine the extent to which the policies and programmes being made are representing the voices of people from below whom they are meant to be working with. The enormous challenge is to avoid imposing top-down externally-informed policies and programmes where the local people just have no say or understanding as seen in SAGE and UWEP. Social workers and policy makers genuinely interested in decolonisation for the sake of the local people have to assertively resist the system that marginalises local voices but seeks to build on existing initiatives.

### **Building on and strengthening the community-based groups**

Decolonising social work with older people in Uganda requires social workers to work towards strengthening the scale and scope of the existing community-based groups like the older women's initiatives. From the older women's stories, their groups have the potential to be strengthened to provide the much needed social protection from below for older people. For instance, the burial aid groups could be strengthened to provide, in addition to burial aid, communal income generation to address poverty. Such strengthening would come through governments giving grants to the groups to run their communal income generating activities through which they will accumulate savings that can be accessed by their members. Also, the rotating grandmothers' groups could be supported by social workers obtaining and advocating for resources to allow older women to start off their projects like their revolving goat loan. This approach is different from government or NGO-led initiatives where new groups are established without any consideration to how the long existing groups can be strengthened. In other words, in all, the groups provide a starting point for social workers and policy makers interested in pursuing strengths-based interventions that elevate the voices of the unheard and leverage their local answers to the adversities being faced. This is the similar lesson that social work educators also need to learn given the interdependence between practice and education.

## **DECOLONISING SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

Decolonising social work education also requires valuing, validating, and integrating such knowledge, lived experiences and stories of older women. There has been a high tendency to devalue such local knowledge. Experiences of the 'locals', 'villagers', the non-formally educated people are often overlooked by the elite, professionals who put much emphasis and regards western knowledge as superior (Avendal, 2011). In fact to act and teach such local knowledge by older women may not be defined by some social workers in Uganda as 'professional' or standardized social work. While some western ways of knowing and doing may be valuable, they reinforce dominant paradigms that marginalise local ways of doing and voices (Doucet & Denov, 2012). Such local knowledge and wisdom of people at the grassroots should form the basis for decolonised social work

education that any relevant western knowledge can build on, but not the other way round. Social work education which is currently dominated by western theories emphasizing individualism need to learn and incorporate in their curriculum the principles of older women's self-organised groups for instance the principles of working in solidarity which reflects the 'ubuntu' philosophy in most African communities.

Some practical strategy to decolonise would also involve allowing different ways of teaching, knowing, beyond the traditional textual western knowledge sources and case examples. The older women who participated in this study were willing to share their life stories of adversities experienced but also their resilience and agency in managing them. Since social work educators are struggling with lack of appropriate written teaching materials and cases, they could invite local older people to share their stories in class and training rooms. In fact this participatory and oral approach to teaching is culturally appropriate in African traditions that value learning from older people as espoused in the saying of '*obukadde mageezi*' implying that old age means accumulated wisdom. From lived experience, most of the social work educators and students have lived in rural life and have personal experiences on how most of these local initiatives are a significant coping mechanism. In fact some social work educators and practitioners are members of such traditional burial aid and savings and credit groups. However, these lived experiences tend to be silenced by the western style social work that encourages professional distance, discourages self-disclosure or sharing of personal experience as this is regarded as unethical, unprofessional and not befitting in the international, standardised social work (Doucet & Denov, 2012). Social workers in Uganda may need to decolonise their thinking, break free of such western ideologies and begin sharing and teaching social work that is practical, real and reflected in their personal and diverse local communities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Uganda is a diverse country comprised of different communities. Although findings of this study demonstrate typical self-organisation particularly by local people in rural communities that mostly depend on subsistence agriculture, traditional ways of helping may be different in other communities for example in cattle keeping communities. Unique ways of helping could also be explored in other regions of Uganda for example in Eastern or Northern Uganda. To appreciate rather than silence this complexity and diversity, more local research needs to be carried out to document community-based ways of helping in different communities. This local research should document in-depth the community-based initiatives, how they are formed and who forms them and why, the principles followed by the initiatives. This research has the potential to inform social work theory and practice in Uganda that is based and builds on indigenous knowledge and models of helping embedded in communities.

## CONCLUSION

Although decolonisation of social work practice and education has been acknowledged, the processes and practical mechanisms on localising social work remain largely slow and unexplored. Lack of local research and knowledge on how to decolonise social work has been curtailing. This paper has presented local knowledge that is based on local voices on how self-organised groups have helped a group of older women to survive in South Western Uganda. It has demonstrated that these local community-based initiatives remain marginalised by the current professional social work practice and education that privileges Eurocentric knowledge and models of helping. It has been argued that culturally appropriate social work practice can greatly benefit from exploring and building on such existing community-based mechanisms that value working in solidarity, utilise local knowledge, wisdom, expertise, skills and resources. The challenge to Ugandan social workers and world-wide is to find ways of creating a favourable, receptive environment in which knowledge and voices from below-from the non-formally educated rural women and men, can speak and be heard.

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